

Prehistoric Cave Art at Bhimbetka, Central India

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Location

Over ninety percent of the known rock art sites in India are concentrated in the sandstone hills (the Vindhya, the Kaimurs and the Mahadeo) in Central India. The reason is sandstone weathers easily to form caves and shelters, and paintings made inside the latter have largely been protected from destruction by natural agencies. The richest of these sites is Bhimbetka (77° 37' E: 22° 50' N), a hill containing over 200 caves and shelters in the Raisen district of Madhya Pradesh. The site is situated in the forested Vindhya Hills north of the Narmada river, midway between Hoshangabad and Bhopal. Other adjoining hills are equally rich in caves and shelters and altogether there are over 1300 of them in an area of 10 km length from east to west. More than 500 of these contain paintings. Excavations in over a dozen shelters at Bhimbetka have revealed a continuous occupational history from Acheulian to Mesolithic times.

The paintings are found on walls and ceilings of the shelters, usually on large even surfaces but sometimes also in small hollows or niches. The majority are within easy reach but some are situated at considerable heights and also at inconvenient places where standing support — natural or artificial — would be needed to paint them. Paintings range from single figures to large canvases — up to 6 m long — containing more than a hundred figures. The size varies from miniature figures of a few centimetres to life-size drawings.

Content

The majority of the paintings are in red or white colours but some are also in green. These last are most poorly preserved and are probably the oldest. Broadly the paintings can be divided into two cultural and chronological phases; (1) prehistoric and; (2) historic, though on the basis of style and superimposition as many as nine phases can be determined. The prehistoric (and

older) paintings are dominated by the depiction of wildlife which includes various species of deer, antelopes, wild boar, elephant, rhinoceros, tiger, wild buffalo, wild cattle, fox, jackal and fish. Birds are shown but are rare. The animals are shown individually as well as in groups and in standing, grazing, moving and running positions. Some animal figures are marked by composite characters, like those of a boar and a bull, and probably represent mythical creatures. There are frequent hunting scenes with men hunting individually or in groups and using spears, bows and arrows, traps and snares. The spears and arrows are tipped and barbed with what appear to be micro-liths. Other food-gathering activities shown include men and women fishing and climbing trees with baskets suspended on their backs to collect fruit, flowers and honey. There are scenes of human life like group dances, drinking, pregnancy, care of the sick and mourning.

The later and historic paintings which are often superimposed over earlier paintings have a limited repertoire of themes. They mostly depict royal processions and battle scenes with men riding caparisoned horses and elephants and fighting with metal tipped spears, bows and arrows, swords and shields.

Style

There is considerable variety in the portrayal of animal figures of the earlier phase. The animal body is drawn only in outline or it is wholly or partially filled with colour or is decorated by geometric patterns like straight or wavy lines, dots, criss-crosses and other more complex designs. The animal figures are characterized by naturalism, vitality and vigour. The majority of these paintings are highly mature artistic creations and suggest a long evolutionary period behind them. In contrast, the paintings of the historic phase are stylized, repetitive and devoid of realism. The latest among

them depict animals in a highly distorted and conventionalized manner. It is obvious that the artists who drew them were no longer inspired by natural life around them but were only repeating traditionally accepted motifs.

Dating

The problem of dating these paintings, especially the older ones, is a difficult one. The total absence of traits suggesting a life based on agriculture and domestication in the earlier paintings clearly shows them to belong to a hunting-gathering stage of life. The discovery of numerous pieces of red ochre in Mesolithic layers in the caves, often with tell-tale marks of having been ground to produce pigment, is proof that painting activity existed during the Mesolithic, and therefore some at least of the older paintings can be assigned to this stage. The few ¹⁴C dates available from Mesolithic deposits do not go earlier than 5000 B.C., but it is very probable that the earliest paintings will eventually turn out to be considerably older than this date.

The paintings of the second phase clearly belong to a stage when urban life was securely established in this area and metal tools were in regular use. This pattern of life cannot be much older than 500 B.C. and therefore the oldest of the paintings may go back to this date. The youngest among them may be even later than first millennium A.D. though one does not come across paintings overlying the Sankha script inscriptions datable to 6th — 7th centuries A.D. However, it needs to be pointed

out that there is no tradition of cave painting among the aboriginal populations of the area nor are they aware of any relationship between their ancestors and the cave paintings.

Problems of preservation and conservation

Bhimbetka paintings are in various stages of preservation. Those which have been exposed to elements for a long time are much faded and sometimes even partially obliterated. Others which are in the interior of the shelters are fairly well preserved. In general the younger paintings are in a better condition than the older ones. In recent years unchecked deforestation on the hill is exposing the paintings more and more to destruction by natural agencies. Another and perhaps more harmful factor is unfortunately the human one. Since these paintings have received considerable publicity, Bhimbetka now attracts thousands of tourists every year. These visitors sometimes disfigure the paintings by writing and scratching their names, etc., on them.

Though the Archaeological Survey of India has appointed several site watchmen to protect the paintings they have not been able to prevent damage by ill-informed visitors. The State Government is now taking steps for afforestation on the hill. The Archaeological Survey of India has begun documentation of rock art and, it is hoped, will take steps to preserve at least the more important of the paintings.